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ABSTRACT

A good deal of evidence now suggests that a strong sense of community in schools has benefits for both staff members and students, while providing a necessary foundation for school improvement. This digest provides an overview of the literature on schools as communities. The digest identifies the elements of community schools, the effects of school community on staff members and students, the structural and organizational factors of community in schools, and the relationship of community to other improvement activities. The digest views a school community as having open communication, widespread participation, a prevalence of teamwork, and diversity that is incorporated. Development of a healthy sense of community may be necessary for the long-term success of school-improvement activities. (Contains 10 references.) (LMI)

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ERIC DIGEST

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# Schools as Communities

*Mark A. Royal and Robert J. Rossi*

Increasingly, educators are paying serious attention to the quality of the relationships that exist among staff members and students in schools. The National Association of Secondary School Principals' recent publication *Breaking Ranks*, for instance, highlights "personalization" of the high school as a key challenge for school reform. Similarly, Ernest Boyer argued in *The Basic School* that fostering "community" in elementary schools is essential for effective schooling in the early grades.

Indeed, a good deal of evidence now exists suggesting that a strong sense of community in schools has benefits for both staff members and students and provides a necessary foundation for school improvement.

## What Are the Elements of Community in Schools?

Although vague generalizations plague many discussions of community, a number of researchers have attempted to identify the fundamental attributes of healthy and vital school communities. For Anthony Bryk and Mary Driscoll (1988), the communally organized school is characterized by a system of shared values related to the school and to education in general; common activities that link school members to each other and to the school's traditions; and an "ethos of caring" in interpersonal relations, evidenced by collegial interactions among staff members and an extended role for teachers that encompasses more than classroom instruction.

Reflecting on successful alternative-school communities she has studied, Mary Anne Raywid (1993), by contrast, highlights six common attributes of these schools: respect, caring, inclusiveness, trust, empowerment, and commitment.

Our own framework for thinking about community in schools—developed in collaboration with John Gardner of Stanford University and refined through focus-group discussions with administrators, teachers, and students from local high schools—has much in common with both of these conceptualizations.

In our view, in a school community, communication is open, participation is widespread, teamwork is prevalent, and diversity is incorporated. Staff members and students share a vision for the future of the school, a common sense of purpose, and a common set of values. They care about, trust, and respect each other, and they recognize each other's efforts and accomplishments.

## How Does School Community Affect Staff Members?

Research suggests that a strong sense of community can facilitate staff members' instructional efforts and enhance their personal well-being. Bryk and Driscoll, for instance, have found that in communally organized schools staff morale is higher, teacher absenteeism is lower, and teachers are more satisfied with their work.

In addition, we have provided evidence that staff members experiencing a strong sense of community tend to be clearer about the expectations others at school have for them and tend to report feeling burned out, overwhelmed, or confronted with conflicting demands less often at school (Royal and Rossi 1996).

A sense of community among staff members may also be an important precursor to the development of a sense of community among students. As community is fostered among staff members, appropriate behaviors and attitudes are modeled for students, helping them to mature in their own interpersonal relationships.

Similar observations have been made with respect to the development of a collaborative school climate. Stuart Smith and James Scott (1990) suggest, that "schools whose teachers cooperate with one another are characterized by cooperation among students."

## How Does School Community Affect Students?

Sense of community in schools may promote a variety of positive outcomes for students. Bryk and Driscoll, for example, found that communally organized schools have fewer problems with student misbehavior (for example, class cutting, student absenteeism) than do other schools. Students in these schools also showed more interest in academics and greater achievement gains, and they dropped out at lower rates.

Our own findings (Royal and Rossi) similarly suggest that students' sense of community is related to their engagement in school activi-

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ties, with students higher in sense of community being less likely to report class cutting behavior or thoughts of dropping out of school and more likely to report feeling bad when unprepared for classes. In addition, we have found that students reporting a high sense of community less often feel burned out at school.

Community may improve schooling for all students, enhancing academic and social develop- ment and providing them with experiences necessary to prepare them for full participation in a democratic society. But a sense of community may be a particularly important component of educational programs targeted at students at risk of academic failure.

In their study of exemplary dropout-prevention programs, Wehlage and colleagues (1989) observed that each devoted considerable attention to overcoming the many barriers that may prevent these students from connecting with the school and developing a sense of belonging, membership, and engagement. Indeed, they note, "the key finding from our research is that effective schools provide at-risk students with a community of support."

### What Are Some Factors That Affect Community in Schools?

Bryk and Driscoll, along with Fred Newmann and his colleagues (1989), have identified a variety of structural and organizational factors that may affect the development of community in schools. Both studies suggest that smaller schools hold more promise for community development than large schools. Indeed, to create more personal and supportive environments, many reformers have advocated dividing large schools into smaller, semiautonomous subunits. Our own research suggests that this type of school organization may enhance sense of community for both staff and students (Royal and Rossi).

Newmann and colleagues also indicate that teachers' sense of community is greater in schools where student behavior is orderly, where administrators are responsive to teacher concerns and show support for innovation, where teachers are knowledgeable of their colleagues' courses and willing to help each other, and where inservice programs are tailored to staff needs.

Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne (1993) caution, however, that a favorable school structure should not be relied upon to produce a strong sense of community in schools by itself. Because individualism and autonomy are prominent features of the staff cultures in many schools, staff mem- bers may not be motivated to take advantage of the opportunities for community development such a structure provides.

Moreover, it should not be assumed that teachers and administrators currently possess the skills required to build and maintain a sense of community in their schools. Westheimer and Kahne argue that training programs should be provided to help staff members understand the benefits of community and to supply them with pedagogical tools and other capabilities needed to foster it.

### How Does Community Relate to Other Improvement Activities?

Development of a healthy sense of community may be necessary for the long-term success of school-improvement activities. These activities can be quite disruptive in a school, often leading to changes in established roles and relationships and challenging fundamental assumptions about teaching and learning. Unless a sound fabric of interpersonal relationships can be woven as improvement activities are planned and launched, potential benefits of these activities may be lost to tension and dissension.

Our recent national evaluations of dropout-prevention programs and programs for students at risk (Rossi and Stringfield 1995), for instance, suggest that a strong sense of community is required to enable staff members to respond effectively to the challenges associated with implementing these reforms and maintaining them over time.

Similarly, Liana Graves (1992) argues that creation of a community context may be essential for the success of specific reforms such as cooperative-learning programs.

Research we have conducted in schools involved in whole-school restructuring also indicates that staff members who experience a strong sense of community at school tend to be more positive about the overall value of the restructuring activities and the progress of restructuring at their schools (Royal and Rossi).

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